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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000697

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SUBJECT: MAURITANIAN MINISTERS ON COUNTER-EXTREMISM

Classified By: Ambassador Mark M. Boulware for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (SBU) DCM met October 21 in separate meetings with the Minister of Islamic Affairs, The Minister of Communication, and the Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports to discuss the efforts of these ministries to combat extremism and to discuss how the DOD Media Information Support Team (MIST), USAID and State Public Diplomacy could complement these efforts. The MIST team discussed ongoing counter-extremism programs underway as well as past information campaigns done with the GIRM. All three ministers described Islamic extremism as counter to the moderate foundations of Mauritanian culture and religion but accepted, to varying degrees, that extremism is a growing (though still small) problem that needs to be addressed. While inter-ministerial cooperation is clear in some of the activities taken to date (such as televised discussions between Mauritanian security officials and Imams on the non-violent tenets of Islam), none of the ministers suggested a centrally coordinated counter-extremism strategy. The three ministers expressed interest in the MIST products and suggested further, technical level, contacts. MIST and PAO have been following up this week in the hopes of developing a counter-extremism collaboration.

¶2. (C) Islamic Affairs: Minister of Islamic Affairs and Original Teaching Ahmed Ould Neini praised the recent MIST-funded collaboration with the Mayors Association of the Brakna region that pulled in nearly a thousand youth for sports and cultural activities that allowed a venue for Islamic leaders to emphasize the non-violent foundations of Islam. He appreciated that the U.S. had supported this Mauritanian effort that had fostered close cooperation between local elected officials, civil society, and Islamic leaders. He confirmed that his ministry had been working closely with other ministries to promote an ant-extremist message and said "your priorities match ours exactly." He discussed the ministry's current effort to conduct a census of all mosques and religious schools mahadras and confided that Mauritanian security officers were embedded in the survey teams. Ould Neini noted that while Mauritania is honored to host legitimate students of Islam (noting, in passing, the increasing number of American Muslims studying in Mauritania) they want to eliminate the extremist teachings espoused by some non-Mauritanians. "We want to know who these foreigners are, where they come from, and what they are saying." Ould Neini accepted that terrorism was no longer a "foreign" issue since there were already a substantial number of Mauritians linked to Al Qaeda; however, he contended these Mauritians were victims of outside religious teachings. Ould Neini expressed interest in longer-term proposals from the Embassy including a sociological survey of Mauritanian terrorists/extremists already in custody to better develop intervention strategies with vulnerable groups and a longer-term development of a "half-way house" concept to transition convicted extremists

back into society. (Bio Note: Ould Neini is an Imam in his own right. He is considered one of the strongest advocates of the moderate stream of Mauritanian Malakite Sunni Islam. He runs one of the largest mahadras in Mauritania and has been a partner with the embassy in past Islamic outreach activities).

13. (C) Communications: Minister of Communications and Relationship with Parliament Mohamed Abdallahi Ould El Boukhary was the most cautious of the three ministers in discussing extremism. He contended that Mauritanian military and security forces had the Al Qaeda threat well in hand and initially downplayed internal extremism. DCM responded that the U.S. recognizes the moderate foundations of Mauritanian culture but noted "even is we accept that 99% of Mauritians condemn terrorism and violence -- 1% still leaves 30,000 who can be of concern." Ould El Boukhary's Director of Communications (an 18-year veteran of the ministry who sat in on the meeting) responded that the Ministry did not dismiss the risk. Even as president Aziz has called the threat "embryonic," the ministry sees extremism as something that requires ongoing attention to prevent its growth. Despite the Minister's desire to downplay the degree of extremism, PAO and MIST visits to state radio and television this past week have been very receptive.

14. (C) Youth: Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports Cisse mint Cheikh Ould Boide was the most impressive of the three ministers in discussing the threat and outlining her strategy. Ould Boide opened by noting "the combination of my three competencies is not by chance." She said President

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Aziz saw extremism growing through the erosion by foreign elements of fundamental elements of Mauritanian culture that need to be reinforced. "Since 62% of Mauritians are youth, that must be our target audience." Sport, for Ould Boide, is one of the most effective avenues to engage youth. The minister said she had just completed her counter-extremism strategy based on reinforcing, or creating where needed, youth centers at the local level in order to keep youth engaged and to build their integration into society. Of the three ministers, she was the one to highlight youth disenchantment and disassociation with Mauritanian government and society as an important factor in encouraging extremism. DCM noted the MIST would be pleased to assist the ministry develop its youth messaging and that, when the USAID counter-extremism program is reinstated, we will look closely at how we can help support the ministry's youth-center strategy.

15. (C) Comment: The Abdallahi government was in the final stages of a draft coordinated counter-extremism strategy in 2008 prior to the coup. That strategy was written in the Ministry of Economy (the ministry that often coordinated inter-ministerial budget initiatives) and was headed by a Presidential advisor. Some of the ministers were aware of the draft but did not see that as a current strategy. The Minister of Islamic Affairs said that while the Presidential Advisor had been replaced by President Aziz, the new advisor did not seem to have counter-extremism coordination as part of his mandate. Ambassador has raised with both Prime Minister Laghdaf and Secretary General of the Presidency Sy Adama our desire to coordinate counter-extremism (as distinct from counter-terrorism) activities with a senior advisor in either the Presidency or Office of the Prime Minister. To date, no such person has emerged. End Comment
BOULWARE